WHAT WE TALK ABOUT WHEN WE TALK ABOUT FEMINISM

One of the goals of this roundtable was to discuss what is seen as a gulf between medieval feminist scholarship and other feminist scholarship in academia. My perspective on this issue is as a newly-minted Ph.D. (I defended my dissertation in January, 2000) and recent survivor of the job market. In these remarks I will offer some comments about current training and hiring from the perspective of a medieval historian whose research is on gender and women's history. These comments are necessarily anecdotal, but may present a useful perspective on whether and how graduate programs and hiring practices help perpetuate the divide.

When I was preparing for this roundtable, what kept going through my mind was a quote from *Through the Looking-Glass*, when Alice encounters Humpty Dumpty. "'When I use a word,' Humpty Dumpty said in a rather a scornful tone, 'it means just what I choose it to mean—neither more nor less.'" My experience as a medieval historian has largely been that people use the word "feminism" to mean just what they choose it to mean, and that this can work both to exclude medievalists from and to include them in broader conversations about women and gender.

I should begin by noting that I myself use "feminism" to mean what I choose it to mean. Although my research is in gender and women's history, and although my graduate institution has a Center for Advanced Feminist Studies and recently was one of the first graduate schools to institute a Ph.D. in Women's Studies, I have no formal training in feminist thought/studies. The result is that although I'm gladly participating in this panel, I'd be hard pressed to give any kind of authoritative definition of feminism myself. However, this hardly seems to matter given that I've encountered medieval historians equally happy to come up with their own definitions.

Today I want to talk about feminism as a school of thought, a theoretical stance from which to study the world. Using this definition, I would argue that one factor that helps create barriers between medieval feminist historians and other varieties of feminists is a lack of training in this theoretical stance. One reason for this is a traditional antipathy to Theory in the historical profession. While to say that historians are anti-theory is a cliché, it has become a cliché simply because sometimes it has been true. Despite the brilliant work in feminist history of all kinds, well-received by many, I have seen work characterized as "feminist" because it is "political" and "has an agenda"—synonyms for sloppy, biased, and poorly researched. "Feminism" becomes treated as any other kind of theory, lumped in with bugaboos like deconstructionism, Marxism, or the approaches of Foucault. Thus historians in general may find themselves less exposed to the

kinds of theories that inform feminist scholarship in other fields, hindering communications between the two.

This lack, however, seems particularly acute for medievalists within the historical profession. I can attest to a certain confusion when medievalist and other women's historians get together. In one instance, for my program's Comparative Women's History Workshop, I was asked to give a comparative comment on a paper dealing with German women's memoirs of the Holocaust. (I should say that I was asked to do this as a favor to a friend, and not because of any perceived expertise in the area.) I talked a little about Margery Kempe and about autobiography as genre of women's writing, but the audience – primarily modern European historians and literary scholars—listened politely and had nothing to say. In another discussion in the same workshop group, a woman studying comparative U.S./Canadian history in the late nineteenth / early twentieth centuries lamented the fact that she had only a half a dozen women's diaries and letter collections from each side of the border to work with. As the rest of the group sympathized with the statistical dilemma she faced and pondered how to integrate this qualitative, and statistically invalid, material into her very quantitative dissertation, it was my turn to say nothing. I had just written a sixty-page dissertation chapter on four letter collections alone, and was having a hard time not exclaiming how thrilled I'd have been to have even one medieval woman's diary.

Again, I would argue that training in medieval history helps foster this divide. First, there are all the obscure skills that medievalists require simply to do any research at all: languages, often dead ones; paleography; diplomatics; codicology; and so on. The amount of time it takes to acquire these skills—skills that have no relevance to people who aren't medievalists—is time taken away from, for instance, studies in feminist theory.

Second, I think in some ways the success of women's history makes it easy to avoid formal feminist study. Here I think it is worth pointing out that my experience with the "success" of women's history presents a contrast to the situation that Dawn Bratsch-Prince outlines, a result of the differences in our fields of study. I am lucky that in my field, medieval English history, feminist scholars such as Eileen Power have served as role models from the beginning of the twentieth century, a tradition which continues to the present day. Therefore women's history was firmly entrenched in the scholarship of my field, but as I noted, I took no courses in Women's Studies or feminist thought in my graduate program. More to the point, no one suggested that I do so. Ironically, the more scholarship appears on medieval women, the more possible it is for a women's historian to complete a Ph.D. in medieval history without needing to "resort" to coursework in other fields, historical or otherwise—including feminist theory.

Because there were so many medieval and early modern history courses offered, or medieval literature courses offered, that seemed immediately relevant to my program, there was little incentive to take formal courses in Women's Studies, as exclusively focused on the modern world as they seemed to be. The perception was that getting involved in such a program would only add to my time in graduate school (a perception that was probably false, given the amount of time I ended up spending anyway!).

Besides, I was doing women's history, wasn't I? Subtext: I don't need to take those classes. But women's history is not the same as feminism, and while you can gain some understanding of feminism through reading women's history, it's not a very systematic method. In avoiding more formal feminist theory I missed the chance to gain some tools that would have helped foster connections with scholars in other fields.

Success in another way perhaps also helped mask the need for scholars of different eras to talk to each other. My graduate program—probably still an anomaly, based on what statistics I've gleaned—had a majority of women students and a majority of women faculty. In many respects this was an incredibly wonderful atmosphere in which to study women's history. As a research field, women's history was respected—or at least accepted (at least, no one criticized it openly). People studying women in different fields didn't need to band together. If there are enough people in your own field, you don't always feel a need to cross disciplines or topics in order to have stimulating conversations. Many people do encourage and engage in an exchange of ideas anyway. But it isn't necessary. In her comments in this issue, Linda McMillin argues that a "quorum" of feminists is necessary before medievalists can be snubbed by scholars of other eras; my department had such a quorum, and it helped encourage the medievalists to learn how to talk to each other, not those in other fields.

My experiences on the job market both confirm and contradict my graduate school experience. First, as a medievalist I have had no luck whatsoever in applying for jobs in Women's Studies departments. It's hard to know what to make of this; I had equally poor luck in applying for many other kinds of jobs. In most cases, however, I couldn't even apply for Women's Studies jobs, as they usually wanted at least one of the following: someone working in the holy trinity of race, class, and gender, sometimes with ethnicity thrown in; somone working on women in the developing world; and/or someone who could teach courses in Feminist Thought (here my graduate coursework, or lack of it, came back to haunt me). Clearly, Women's Studies positions, in the last three years at least, are not being created with medievalists in mind. I read these position descriptions in hope, but every time found my suspicion confirmed that they wanted Someone

Else. A similar phenomenon occurred with jobs listed simply under the heading "Women's History:" almost invariably, "women's history" defaulted to United States women's history. On the few occasions that they did not, we were back to the developing world again. (In 1999–2000 I was employed in the only job I have ever seen that combined medieval and early modern European history with Women's Studies, but this was a replacement position designed to fill the shoes of an individual who had carved out this territory for herself, rather than to fulfill a conscious desire on the part of History or Women's Studies to combine these fields.)

Being a feminist medievalist, however, helped me on the job market in other ways. In one instance, I got the strong (though difficult to document) impression that being a medievalist helped make the feminism more palatable to the chair of the search in question. I might have been a feminist, but I studied such a long ago and dead era that I probably wasn't going to cause any trouble by paying very close attention to our own.

Contrarily, in on-campus interviews I also often found a connection with other faculty studying women, a connection that I don't think I would have made otherwise. I should note here that my interviews were all in relatively small, teaching-oriented institutions, perhaps reinforcing Linda McMillin's observations about medievalist-feminism in small school settings. In these institutions, I found that doing women's history could give me a connection to faculty members who might not have felt any affinity with a medievalist otherwise. Obviously this is the case with any thematic focus—religious historians of the Middle Ages, for instance, might be expected to connect with religious historians of other periods more than with historians of other fields. But the connection I felt with historians studying women of other periods was much stronger than any connections with historians of the middle classes, or of urban society, or of cultural history—other scholarly fields in which my research is located. As I gave on-campus presentations, teaching or research, the (usually) women who studied women, often women who had began their careers studying something else entirely and had come to studying women well after they received their degrees, were the ones who nodded in the right places and who eagerly engaged me in discussions of authors such as Gerda Lerner in the receptions afterward. In fact, even in those brief, crazy-making visits I made greater contact with other feminist scholars, and started to get a broader context for the issues that I study, a context lacking in my graduate program.

I'm not sure what to make of these experiences, or how to put them in a broader context. My own experience of graduate study in medieval history suggests that it does not traditionally train historians to make connections with colleagues in other fields and departments. In this respect, feminists are simply one of a number

of groups that medievalists don't reach. The potential for connection is there, however, and many people on an individual basis are making those connections and training students to make those connections as well. To return to Humpty Dumpty, it's important that we not follow his lead, and choose what we want feminism to mean, but that we engage in the collective endeavor of figuring out what it means, in order to be able to talk in a language that reaches across fields. Not only will it allow our scholarship to reach a broader audience, but in the spirit of self-interest, I submit that it will help on the job market as well.

Anna Dronzek
Temple University

THE CRISIS IN THE HUMANITIES: FEMINISM, MEDIEVAL STUDIES, AND THE ACADEMY

This paper addresses the crisis of the humanities (here understood to include the field of history) from the dual perspective of feminism and Medieval Studies. The structure of higher education in this country is truly diverse, and our careers and our insights are shaped in part by the differing missions, expectations, and cultures of the institutions in which we work. For this reason it is important for me to point out that the reflections on the "big picture" offered here have arisen in the context of twelve years of teaching, service, and research at a private research university. I also speak in this paper as president of the Society for Medieval Feminist Scholarship, taking that role as an occasion to reflect on the challenges facing the feminist medievalist community in today's rapidly changing academy, and to enumerate the intellectual strengths which we, the community of feminist medievalists, possess and upon which we can draw to meet those challenges.

I will not discuss here the relative merits and demerits of theories of gender, feminism, and sexuality that invigorate the academy today, noting only that debate among divergent scholarly approaches and theories is fundamental to the health and vitality of the scholarly community. No one approach, theory, or grand narrative has a monopoly on truth, creativity, insight, and rigor, whether it be, for example, critical theory, information technology, post-structuralism, poetics, deconstruction, cultural studies, philology, queer theory, or psychoanalytic criticism. We cannot know from whence new, original, and creative ideas will emerge; we can, however, act on our feminist commitment to engage in civil, intellectual debate and to press for diversity at every level within the academy.

Thinking about the crisis in the humanities means thinking about the politics of